

VZCZCXRO4349  
PP RUEHROV  
DE RUEHDS #1564/01 1611019  
ZNY CCCCC ZZH  
P 091019Z JUN 08  
FM AMEMBASSY ADDIS ABABA  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 0875  
INFO RUCNIAD/IGAD COLLECTIVE PRIORITY  
RUEHAE/AMEMBASSY ASMARA PRIORITY 2860  
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY  
RHMFISS/CJTF HOA PRIORITY  
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY  
RUEKDIA/DIA WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY  
RHMFISS/HQ USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL PRIORITY  
RUEKJCS/JOINTAFF WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY  
RHMFISS/HQ USAFRICOM STUTTGART GE PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 05 ADDIS ABABA 001564

NOFORN  
SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR AF AND AF/E, AND INR/AA  
LONDON, PARIS, ROME FOR AFRICA WATCHER  
CJTF-HOA AND USCENTCOM FOR POLAD

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/29/2018  
TAGS: [KDEM](#) [PREL](#) [PBTS](#) [ET](#) [ER](#)  
SUBJECT: ERITREAN OPPOSITION UNITES, AGAIN

REF: A. 07 ADDIS ABABA 3016  
[1](#)B. 07 ADDIS ABABA 3101  
[1](#)C. ADDIS ABABA 84  
[1](#)D. ADDIS ABABA 216

Classified By: Ambassador Donald Yamamoto. Reason: 1.4 (B) and (D).

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY. The May 5-11, 2008 Eritrean political opposition congress in Addis Ababa reformed and expanded the Eritrean Democratic Alliance (EDA) to serve as the umbrella organization for all Eritrean opposition groups. Embassy officers spoke with more than a dozen opposition leaders and civil society representatives before, during, and after the conference to obtain a read-out of the week-long meeting. The congress established that the objective of the EDA was to "pave the way for a democratic transformation" in Eritrea, and sought to hold at a future date a national reconciliation conference with all interested Eritrean parties and organizations, including the Eritrean government if the government was willing. The EDA established a 13 member executive council headed by Tewelde Ghebreselasse and a 13 member legislative council chaired by Abdalla Mahmoud. The fundamental operating principle of the EDA is that all important decisions must be made by unanimous consent. The congress was nearly derailed on May 8 when the 13 parties were unable to agree upon who would become the secretary general, but they compromised on Tewelde. For the first time, Eritrean civil society organizations formally interacted with the EDA as observers, and all sides agreed that the observers had a positive impact on the congress. EDA leaders were sensitive to criticism that they were a puppet of Ethiopia and would prefer to hold future conferences elsewhere if given sufficient funding. Lastly, three of the EDA organizations are descendants of the Eritrean Islamic Jihad, and Post would appreciate guidance from Washington, in consultation with Embassy Asmara, on how to deal with this sensitive issue. END SUMMARY.

-----  
MAY 2008 EDA CONGRESS "SUCCESSFUL"  
-----

[1](#)2. (U) The May 5-11, 2008 Eritrean political opposition congress in Addis Ababa was considered to be a "great success" by the participants and resulted in the re-establishment of an expanded Eritrean Democratic Alliance to serve as the umbrella organization for all Eritrean opposition groups. The conference was attended by 43

representatives from 13 different Eritrean opposition groups and 33 observers, including several exiled religious leaders and representatives of Eritrean civil society organizations from Africa, the Middle East, Europe, North America, and Australia. (Note: The plethora of Eritrean opposition groups have been attempting to unify against President Isaias since 1999 when they established the Alliance of Eritrean National Forces (AENF) in Khartoum with Sudanese assistance. The AENF became the Eritrean National Alliance (ENA) in 2002 and then transformed into the EDA in 2004 or 2005. Until the May 2008 conference, the various opposition coalitions existed in name only and never functioned as a unified element. The EDA in February 2007, while in the process of trying to establish itself after several years of failure, formally split into two factions, Bloc I and Bloc II, when the parties were unable to agree on who to elect to the leadership. End Note.)

-----  
COMPOSITION OF THE EDA  
-----

13. (U) The EDA is now composed of 13 organizations; the three groups from EDA Bloc I, the seven groups from EDA Bloc II, and three previously independent groups who formally joined the EDA during the conference. The Bloc I groups include: the Eritrean Democratic Party (EDP), the Eritrean Liberation Front-Revolutionary Council (ELF-RC), and the Eritrean National Salvation Front (ENSF). The Bloc II groups include the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF), the Democratic Movement for the Liberation of Eritrean Kunama (DMLEK), the

ADDIS ABAB 00001564 002 OF 005

Red Sea Afar Democratic Organization (RSADO), the Eritrean Federal Democratic Movement (EFDm), the Eritrean Islamic Party for Justice and Development (EIPJD), the Eritrean Popular Congress (EPC), and the Eritrean Popular Democratic Front (EPDF). The three additional organizations include the Eritrean Nahda Party (ENP), the Eritrean People's Movement (EPM), and the Eritrean Islamic Congress (EIC).

-----  
CONGRESS SEEKS "DEMOCRATIC TRANSFORMATION" IN ERITREA  
-----

14. (U) The concluding statement of the congress included the following points:

- Announced the EDA's readiness to study means of holding a dialogue with the Eritrean regime, provided Asmara shows its readiness to find a peaceful means to resolve the political crisis in Eritrea by paving the way for a democratic transformation and establishing a constitutional rule that conforms to the will of the people and their aspiration for security and stability;

- Called on the Eritrean Defense Forces to side with the will of the people;

- Called on all governments, and local and international organizations, to boycott the Eritrean regime and redirect their assistance to the Eritrean people through their national political forces (i.e. the EDA);

- Called on all stake holders--civil societies, political forces, intellectuals and leaders of the society--to a national dialogue conference to address problems created by the regime, particularly those dealing with challenges to national unity.

15. (U) EDA leaders agreed that they are not seeking a military overthrow of the Isaias regime and are publicly calling for the Eritrean government to join the EDA, and any other Eritrean organizations that are willing, in a national dialogue conference intended to initiate a "democratic transformation." EDA leaders said that they would be pleased

to hold the national conference inside Eritrea with the participation of Isaias' People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ), but readily admitted that PFDJ participation was highly unlikely. With or without the Eritrean government, the EDA intends to go forward with the national conference and one EDA leader said they hope to hold it by the end of 2008.

-----  
EDA SEEKS POPULAR UPRISING AGAINST ISAIAS  
-----

¶6. (C) Privately, the EDA leaders said they are seeking a popular uprising against Isaias from within Eritrea. When queried, however, the new EDA leaders could not articulate a clear strategy for how to organize and execute such an uprising. The EDA leaders said that they do not want to make war against their countrymen who are forced to serve in the army, rather they want to co-opt the military to support the EDA. (Note: The reported May 30, 2008 attack on the Eritrean Army near Massawa by the RSADO suggests that not all of the parties subscribe to the no war principle.)

-----  
EDA ORGANIZATION  
-----

¶7. (U) The EDA conference established a 13 member executive council and a 13 member legislative council to oversee and run the organization. Of the 13 groups, 12 are allotted one seat each on both councils while the thirteenth group holds the secretary general or chairman position. The EDA elected Tewelde Ghebreselasse from the EPDF as secretary general of the executive council and nominal head of the EDA. According to EDA members, the position of secretary general is meant to be as a coordinator or facilitator rather than that of a true

ADDIS ABAB 00001564 003 OF 005

executive, and the officeholder is limited to a one year term.

¶8. (U) The 12 members of the executive council organized themselves into four departments, each with a different task. The staffing of the departments took place during the week of May 18 following the conference. The Department of Finance and Administration is staffed by Hajji Abdelnur from the EDP, Ahmed Mohammed Sefer from the EIPJD, and Ramadan Mohammed Nur from the EIC.

¶9. (U) The Department of Information is tasked with informing the public, the diaspora, and in particular, Eritreans inside Eritrea concerning the EDA's activities and program. This department is staffed by Kernelios Osman from the DMLEK, Hassan Ali Asad from the ELF, and Ghebremichael Askale from the ENSF.

¶10. (U) The Department of Foreign Relations is tasked with liaising with the international community. This department is staffed by Nur Mohammed Idris from the ENP, Adhanom Ghebremariam from the EPM, and Beshir Isaak from the EFDM.

¶11. (U) The Department of Social and Public Affairs is tasked with working issues related to the diaspora and refugees. This department is staffed by Ibrahim Harun from the RSADO, Mohammed Tahir Shengeb from the EPC, and Mohammed Ali Ibrahim from the ELF-RC.

¶12. (U) Abdalla Mahmoud from the ENSF was elected by the conference to serve as chairman of the legislative council. The job of the legislative council is to set the program for the executive council to implement. The chairman serves for a one year term. One civil society member said that Abdalla, who does not speak English, could be a good leader and considered him "an intellectual and charismatic, yet reserved."

-----  
EDA OPERATES BY CONSENSUS  
-----

¶13. (U) The basic operating principle of the EDA is that all important decisions must be made by consensus. EDA leaders admitted privately that unanimity is required because of the lack of trust between the parties and they admitted that this rule makes the decision-making process lengthy and difficult. One EDA leader said that the consensus principle is a "fatal flaw" in the organization, but noted that the EDA would not be possible without it.

-----  
LEADERSHIP IMPASSE NEARLY DERAILED CONGRESS  
-----

¶14. (U) According to EDA leaders and civil society members, the conference nearly broke down on May 8 in a fight between Bloc I and Bloc II over who would be elected secretary general and a failure to achieve consensus, the same issues that derailed the EDA in 2007. The impasse arose when Hussein Khalifa, chairman of the ELF and Bloc II, announced that ELF would not put forward any candidates for the top two offices and announced that neither would they accept the candidacy of Mengesteab Asmerom, an ELF-RC member and chairman of Bloc I. An EDA leader explained that Hussein and Mengesteab, as original ELF members, have a long and bitter history and neither was willing to submit himself to the other's leadership. The impasse continued into the evening when the civil society observers told the EDA that they could not leave the room until they had settled on a leader. The civil society members then left the room and kept the doors closed until the secretary general was selected. After several hours inside the room, ELF-RC finally relented and withdrew its candidate. The new candidates to emerge were: Sheikh Khalil Mohammed Amir, chairman of EIPJD; Tewelde Ghebreselasse, chairman of the EPDF; Adhanom Ghebremariam, chairman of EPM; Abdalla Mahmoud, head of information for ENSF; Beshir Isaac, chairman of the EFDM; and Nur Mohammed Idris, chairman of ENP.

ADDIS ABAB 00001564 004 OF 005

¶15. (U) One by one the candidates withdrew their nominations for the sake of EDA unity until only Tewelde Ghebreselasse remained, making him the secretary general by consensus. One EDA leader said that Tewelde, originally from the ELF, was a strong supporter of Ethiopian-style ethnic federalism, but noted that he was the least controversial candidate for the top position. When queried, once civil society member said Tewelde "has resolve and consistency." He also said that Tewelde was not a strong leader, but insisted that "the timing is not right for strong leaders." Another EDA member said that the leaders picked by the congress were not intended to be future leaders of Eritrea, those leaders would come from the younger generation.

-----  
ERITREAN CIVIL SOCIETY PARTICIPATION "HISTORIC"  
-----

¶16. (U) The participation of Eritrean civil society groups was their first formal interaction with the political opposition in the history of the opposition to Eritrean President Isaias, according to conference attendees. Civil society members said that until now they had viewed the opposition with disdain as too fractured and self-serving. The civil society members noted that there was now a growing sentiment within most Eritrean groups that they need to work together to bring change to Eritrea. EDA leaders said that allowing the participation of civil society was at first a contentious issue, but that after the conference there was universal acknowledgment that their involvement was a positive change. EDA leaders and civil society members highlighted that it was the civil society observers who

forced the opposition leaders into a closed room on May 8 until they had solved their leadership impasse. Ad hoc committees have been formed among the civil society groups to support the EDA's four departments in an effort to institutionalize the civil society-EDA relationship.

-----  
EDA-ETHIOPIAN RELATIONSHIP A THORNY ISSUE  
-----

¶17. (C) The Ethiopian government provided the venue for the conference and Foreign Minister Seyoum Mesfin spoke at the opening and closing ceremonies, but no Ethiopian officials were permitted to attend the daily working sessions. EDA leaders, when queried, admitted that the perception of the EDA as an Ethiopian puppet was a problem for the diaspora because it undermined the EDA's credibility in their eyes. The leaders made it clear, however, that they held the conference in Ethiopia because they had no choice; they lacked the financial resources to hold the meeting in Europe or elsewhere. The leaders noted that they would be pleased to hold the next conference outside Ethiopia if the United States provided financial support. One civil society member said that the location was of only secondary importance to the fact that the conference heralded a new era of cooperation between the opposition groups.

¶18. (C) Ethiopian support was channeled through the Sanaa Forum, the organization created by Ethiopia, Sudan, and Yemen to serve as their interlocutor with the Eritrean opposition. The Sanaa Forum representative attended the conference's opening and closing ceremonies and facilitated some of the logistical requirements for the meeting.

-----  
ERITREAN ISLAMIC JIHAD DESCENDANTS ARE EDA MEMBERS  
-----

¶19. (C) Three of the EDA member groups are factions from Eritrean Islamic Jihad, according to EDA leaders and Post's research. EIJ is believed to be responsible for the murder of a British national in Eritrea in 2003 and other terrorist acts in Eritrea. The three groups are: the Eritrean Islamic Party for Justice and Development, also known as Alkhalas, led by Sheikh Mohammed Khalil Amir; the Eritrean People's Congress, also known as the Eritrean Popular Congress, led by

ADDIS ABAB 00001564 005 OF 005

Mohammed Tahir Shengeb; and the Eritrean Islamic Congress led by Hassan Salman. The Eritrean People's Congress is associated with another EIJ descendant, the Eritrean Islamic Reform (Islah) Movement. Although Post has avoided direct contact with these groups, EDA leaders claim the Islamic groups have moderated their political platforms and have abandoned their previously radical positions. The EDA leadership has repeatedly recommended that Post engage with the three groups to gain a better understanding of them and has insisted that excluding them from contact is counterproductive.

-----  
COMMENT  
-----

¶20. (C/NF) The 13 EDA parties have clearly demonstrated a unity of purpose--the end of the Isaias government--but they have yet to display a true unity of effort in nine years of trying. The May 2008 EDA conference appears at this early stage to be the closest they have come to unity of effort thus far, but it remains to be seen if the 13 parties have truly entered a new era of cooperation. With a couple of exceptions, the EDA is led by the "old guard," veteran fighters from Eritrea's war for independence who still think more like 1970s insurgents than contemporary political leaders. Mistrust runs high between the leaders many of whom either split from each other or fought against each other

during the Eritrean People's Liberation Front's (EPLF) forced expulsion of the ELF from Eritrea in the 1980s. Post assesses that a true change of mindset by the senior leadership is required if the organization is to develop fully into an instrument of democratic transformation in Eritrea. The participation of Eritrean civil society groups is a positive sign because they bring younger, western educated leaders into the fold and show promise of being able to inject more open and democratic thinking to the EDA. Nevertheless, the EDA most certainly would benefit from capacity building assistance in basic democratic principles, as well as public relations education and media training.

¶21. (C/NF) COMMENT CONTINUED. The inclusion of the three Islamic groups will make it increasingly difficult for Embassy officers to avoid contact with them and Post would welcome guidance clarification from the intelligence community on the extent of associations between EIJ and the EIJ-derived parties as well as the degree of concern that these derived parties retain extremist elements or ideologies. Post would further welcome guidance from Washington, in consultation with Embassy Asmara, on how to deal with this sensitive issue. Embassy Addis Ababa stands prepared to manage and implement U.S. assistance to Eritrean opposition or civil society organizations operating in Ethiopia, such as through Eritrea-allocated Special Self Help funds, Democracy and Human Rights Funds, or public affairs programming. END COMMENT.  
YAMAMOTO